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Tuesday, May 11, 2010

## Catch bus, or locate it on Google

By DAVID BROOKS  
 Staff Writer

NASHUA – Want to catch Citybus, but not sure when the next bus is coming along? There's an app for that.

Nashua Transit System has become the first agency in New Hampshire to be part of Google Transit, a free service of the online search giant Google that lets people go online, via computer or smart phone, to find routes and schedules.

The system is designed to remove buses' big weakness: uncertainty.

No more standing at a stop, wondering when it will come and where it will go. Making a query automatically finds the next bus, because Google Transit factors in the time that the request is made.

"If you're thinking, 'I want to stop in this store,' you can know that you have 20 minutes before (the bus) arrives," said Mark Sousa, director of transportation for Nashua.

It is also possible to use the system at home to plot a trip: For example, it can quickly tell you that Citybus Route 2 leaves the intersection of Amherst and Celina streets at 3:13 p.m. and takes you to the downtown transit center, where the Route 6 bus leaves at 3:45 p.m. and gets to the Pheasant Lane Mall at 4:15 p.m.

Google provides the service for free – one of many such services that it provides online as a way to build Internet traffic around its search engine.

Sousa said Citybus had long wanted a service like this and included it in "request for proposals" made when soliciting bids to upgrade the Web site.

"They all said, get with Google, it's a free deal," said Sousa

Free doesn't mean easy, however. First, the city had to maneuver through the crush of bus and subway services looking to be included in Google Transit, then it had to go through the various technical steps, including finding and uploading exact latitude/longitude data for every one of its bus stops.

The system is so new that Google hasn't updated its own map: Nashua isn't yet listed as one of the cities where Google Transit operates. Despite this, the Citybus information is already in the database.

Citybus still hopes for one major improvement, which may be up and running by late summer: Including real-time data about where buses are running, so you'll know if the bus you want is running late.

All the city's buses already carry the GPS transponders to provide this data. The difficulty, said Sousa, is getting all the various software to communicate the data so that it is always available online.

That improvement may show up as part of a redesign to the Citybus Web site, although that is still uncertain, Sousa said.

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